

Real Joy and the Laughing Woman

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristchurchEastBay.org. Good morning, Christchurch. My name is Carrie Moulton, and I'm a member of the Welcome Team.

And today's reading is from the book of Genesis, chapter 18, verses 1 through 15, and chapter 21, verses 1 through 7.

A reading from the book of Genesis. The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

[1 : 09] He said, If I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.

Let me get you something to eat so you can be refreshed and go on your way, now that you have come to your servant. Very well, they answered. Do as you say.

So Abraham hurried to the tent to Sarah. Quick, he said, get three sias of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread. Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice tender calf and gave it to a servant who hurried to prepare it.

He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

Where is your wife Sarah, they asked him. There in the tent, he said. Then one of them said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

[2 : 21] Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.

So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, After I am worn out and my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure? Then the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Will I really have a child now that I am old?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son. Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, I did not laugh.

But he said, Yes, you did laugh. Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.

Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him as God commanded him.

[3 : 32] Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.

And she added, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.

Good morning, Christ Church. When we first moved here about 20 years ago to Berkeley to start this church, I read a book by Bill Bryson.

Anybody read Bill Bryson? Phenomenal writer. He wrote a book around that time called A Short History of Nearly Everything. And I thought maybe this will help me as I'm preparing to be a pastor here in Berkeley.

And he said this. He said, It appears that if you wish to have a planet suitable for life, you have to be just awfully lucky. And the more advanced the life, the luckier you have to be.

[4 : 37] We are to an almost uncanny degree, the right distance from the right sort of star. One that is big enough to radiate lots of energy, but not so big as to burn itself out swiftly.

We are also fortunate to orbit where we do. Too much nearer and everything on earth would have boiled away, much farther away, and everything would have frozen. And what he's talking about there is that we live in a Goldilocks universe.

We live in a Goldilocks solar system. It's not too big. It's not too small. Not too hot. Not too cold. Everything is just right. And the Christian interpretation of that data is that we're neither lucky nor fortunate, but rather that we have someone above us to thank.

And, you know, when we explore this first and foundational book of the Bible, and we meet this God in Genesis 1 and 2, this God who said, Fiat Lux.

Go Bears. Fiat Lux. Let there be light and bang. There was light. And this God who said, let there be a fine-tuned universe with physical constants that are precisely calibrated within an incredibly narrow range so as to make the existence of life possible.

[6 : 02] Let there be DNA. Let there be this double helix structure that encodes the biological information and instructions for making you, you.

And let there be within that DNA all the incredible things that would make for the human eye and all of its brilliant complexity and all the human hand and its functional sophistication.

You see, the creator God of Genesis 1 and 2 who made this massive universe we live in and these marvelous bodies that we inhabit and who formed us in His image and breathed life into us, as Andrew prayed a minute ago, He's the same Redeemer God of the rest of Genesis, from Genesis to Revelation, that, in other words, the maker of heaven and earth is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

And from these people that God has put Himself in a relationship with will come Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord through whom salvation will come into the world and He'll remake reality into a new heavens and a new earth.

He'll resurrect our bodies. He'll grant us new and everlasting life in this new space, time, and matter universe. And we need to hold on to that big picture and this sweeping grand metanarrative when we, anytime we dive into the details of a text like this, the details of Abraham and Sarah and this life of faith that God is inviting them to journey into today.

[7 : 45] And as we dive into this, I want us to think about a couple things, three things, as always. I want us to think about God's power and God's grace and God's Son.

God's power, God's grace, and God's Son. Now, I need your help today because I didn't get my day off this week and had to spend it all day Friday with a bunch of Presbyterians. So, I'm sort of riding on your enthusiasm and your intentiveness today.

This will rise and fall on what you bring to the sermon. So, we're going to talk, first of all, about God's power. Okay? And in verse, chapter 18, we can see here that Abraham is a typical ancient Near Eastern Bedouin.

He's living in a intense, this semi-nomadic life with his family and his flocks in this harsh desert conditions. There's no police force.

There's no justice system. There's no hospital or urgent care. There's no Trader Joe's. And these three visitors, these three travelers come to Abraham and he has no idea who they are.

[8 : 50] We do as readers. We're told in verse 1, but Abraham doesn't have a clue. The only thing he knows is that these are three guests in these same harsh desert conditions who are in need of welcome and in need of hospitality.

Now, we all know that xenophobia, the definition of xenophobia is the fear of strangers and that it's opposite. Xenophilia is the love of strangers.

And in Abraham's day, it was your highest duty. It was a sacred virtue to practice xenophilia, to lavish hospitality on guests and strangers, to roll out the red carpet for people you didn't know to make them feel at home and at rest.

And these guests received from Abraham this warm, gracious, royal welcome. Now, just pause as an aside right here to say that part of the mission of God's church in the midst of this epidemic of loneliness that we're living through and the erosion of all of our communities of trust.

What we want to do and what we want to be is like Abraham where when guests arrive, we hurry over to them and we speak with them.

[10 : 14] Right? And you don't have to do like Abraham. You don't have to bow down on the ground. You know, a warm smile, a friendly handshake will do. But Abraham assesses the needs of these guests and he says, you know, what would honor them?

What would make them feel refreshed? And again, you don't have to go bake bread or wash their feet or barbecue some choice meat. You just have to say, hey, what are you doing for lunch today? Hey, you want to come to our coffee hour?

I want to invite you to my table and I want to invite you into my life. Again, Abraham has no idea who this is.

He just gives them a welcome that's fit for God himself. And the book of Hebrews in the New Testament says, do not forget to show hospitality to strangers for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

A direct reference to our text today. So it's not immediately apparent who this is, but we're told in verse 1 it's the Lord and we're told in verse 13 that the Lord is the one who's speaking.

[11 : 19] So it's clear that this is Yahweh and these are his two angelic messengers that he's brought with him and why has he come? Well, look at verse 9. It says, where is your wife Sarah?

There in the tent, he said. And then the Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old and Sarah was past the age of childbearing so Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, after I am worn out and my Lord is old will I now have this pleasure?

We've seen the Lord come for Abraham the past few weeks. But in this text, the Lord doesn't come for Abraham, he comes for Sarah. And we said last week, this is remarkable because in ancient Near Eastern literature, women hardly exist.

But in the Bible, the first book of the Bible, they're part of the main cast of characters from Eve to Hagar to Sarah to Rebecca and Rachel and Leah. You get into Exodus, Shipra, Puah, Miriam.

It's astounding. And the Lord doesn't come to talk to Abraham. He's sort of talking through Abraham at points because he wants a personal relationship with Sarah.

[12 : 38] Verse 9, where's Sarah? Verse 10, he knows that Sarah's listening at the entrance of the tent so he speaks a word to her and she becomes the focus of his attention for the rest of the text.

What we know so far is that God has called Abraham, he's made promises to Abraham, Genesis 12, Genesis 15. Sarah knows this information but the question is where is she with the Lord?

Does she know the Lord? Has she come to lean the full weight of her trust on the Lord? Because the scriptures tell us it's not good enough to just know the Lord through other people and everything she knows so far is through her husband Abraham.

The question here is Sarah knows about the Lord but does she know the Lord? Has she had her own personal encounter and experience with the Lord? Now I've been a pastor long enough to see many girlfriends and wives drag guys to church and many parents drag their kids to church and I've seen it work in the opposite direction.

Kids sometimes drag their parents to church and guys sometimes drag their significant others to church but what matters is have you met the Lord? Do you realize that he's seeking you?

[13 : 59] Do you realize that he knows your name? Where's Sarah? The Lord it's interesting he comes into her life in such a different way than he came into Abraham's life because if you remember back to Genesis 15 the Lord appeared to Abraham in this super dramatic way in the darkness God is this you know this smoking pot and fiery torch sort of image of God and he's walking through these broken bodies and all this shed blood and you know how does how does God come to Sarah here?

Totally different he comes in the middle of the day he comes in in such a personal such a familiar such an accessible and approachable way that they don't even know it's him for like most of the time and if you compare Genesis 15 with Genesis 18 you can see that the Lord comes into our lives in a variety of different ways sometimes dramatic and sometimes just natural and normal sometimes suddenly and a lot of times gradually sometimes it's super obvious sometimes it's just so subtle but he's a he's a God of both infinity and intimacy right and we've got to be careful we don't make one of those two more normative than the other we've got to be careful not to try to emulate someone else's experience of God or not to project our own experience of God onto other people and say well you're not a real spiritual person you're not a real Christian unless you've encountered

God in the way that I have it's clear that the Lord wants a personal and direct relationship with Sarah and notice how he gets her attention he says where's Sarah and she must be thinking to herself okay how does this stranger whom I've never met know my name and then verse 10 says the Lord said I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son now the Lord knows Sarah's listening and the Lord also knows that Sarah's had a lifetime of infertility and barrenness the Lord knows that now she's 90 years old she's well past the age of menopause Abraham's 100 years old the Lord knows that conception is impossible for this couple that's well beyond childbearing age the Lord knows that even if conception were possible a safe delivery a healthy birth would be out of the question the Lord knows that this couple is procreatively dead and that it would take a divine intervention it would take a supernatural work of almighty God for them to have a child and so the Lord reiterates his word and his promise knowing how ridiculous it sounds knowing how impossible it seems to see how she'll respond and verse 12 says that

Sarah laughed to herself as she thought after I'm worn out and my Lord is old will I now have this pleasure have any of you ever laughed at God you ever laughed at his word you ever laughed at the promises that he's made Sarah was not the first person to laugh at God if you go back to Genesis 17 God tells Abraham he says your wife Sarah will be the mother of nations and kings of peoples will come from her and the text says that Abraham fell face down laughing with incredulous laughter Abraham laughed but the Lord transformed his unbelief into belief but Sarah's laugh is an indicator that Abraham's not been able to persuade her not been able to convince her not been able to win her over the way the Lord won him over her laughter means that her interest in the Lord's promise the Lord's covenant is not very deep that her belief in the Lord's power the Lord's ability is not very strong and secure at all and that's why he comes seeking her where's Sarah because he wants to draw her into this relationship of believing participation and establish her in his promises so how does this apply how do we apply this to our lives what does God say to Sarah listen you little mortal how dare you laugh at me the Lord of the universe no he says in verse 14 he says is anything too hard for the Lord it's one of the great verses in the whole Bible it's repeated over and over and that word hard that word difficult can also be translated wonderful is there anything too wonderful for the Lord the Psalms use this word all the time if you read the prayer book of the Bible you'll see it says it talks about the God who works wonders and it says be filled with awe at his wonders tell of all his wonders praise his wonderful person praise his wonderful works and the question is anything too wonderful for the Lord reveals Sarah's basic problem it reveals our basic problem because her laughter is a laughter of incredulity and skepticism it's a laughter that's devoid of wonder a laughter that's devoid of awe and astonishment and adoration at the almighty power of the living

God another place this text is repeated is in the prophet Jeremiah the prophet Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 32 ah sovereign Lord you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and your outstretched arm nothing is too hard for you now one of the things I'm fascinated by and maybe some of you can come and help me with this after the service but the James Webb telescope is sending back information and it's telling us that there are either 100 billion or 400 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy alone which is a big difference and a lot of stars and then it says that there's either 100 billion or 200 trillion galaxies out there and we know that just our star our sun's energy output every second is equivalent to the explosion of 91 billion hydrogen bombs right we know so much more about the wonders of God's creation and the point here is this that if God can create all of this if God can make this massive universe and these marvelous bodies then he obviously does not find things difficult or stressful or overwhelming or exhausting the way that you and I might giving life to the procreatively dead becoming incarnate in the womb of a virgin dying on a cross for the sins of the whole world defeating death on the third day regenerating a sinner like me glorifying a sinner like you it's not a problem for him there are no difficulties there's no barriers there's no opposition that would render him impotent or unable to keep his promises and so what the Lord is doing is he's seeking Sarah and he's challenging Sarah and he's converting

[22 : 11] Sarah from unbelief to belief in his wonderful power and perhaps he's asking you the same question is there anything too wonderful for the Lord some of you are facing big things difficult things but is your God too small have you put God in a box are you imposing unnecessary limitations on God's power is God able to do beyond what all that you can ask or imagine and where is your wonder where where's your awe where's your astonishment and adoration of the almighty power of the living God he delights in exercising his power to do things that are hard and to do things that are wonderful and not only can he bring about the supernatural birth of this promised son Isaac but he's also able to affect the supernatural rebirth and conversion of Sarah's heart and if he did that for her man he can do it for anyone he can do it for you he can do it for all the people in your life so

God's God's power again I was with Presbyterians all day on Friday so help help a brother out let's talk about God's grace the Hebrew name that Abraham and Sarah gave to their son means laughter Isaac laughter and if you look at chapter 21 verse 6 it says Sarah said God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me well wasn't she already laughing well I want to more closely examine the different kinds of laughter here because in the first part of the story Sarah's laughing with a laughter of incredulity and skepticism but it's clear by the second part of the story God has transformed her laughter into a laughter of belief and a laughter of wonder and how do we move from one kind of laughter to the other how did that work for Sarah how might it work for you again chapter 18 verse 12 so Sarah laughed and she laughed to herself and she thought this to herself she thought after I am worn out and my

Lord is old will I now have this pleasure now what is she laughingly thinking to herself she says I am worn out and that word means I am useless I am worthless I am good for nothing I am a nobody perhaps you've had that thought run through your head she says will I have pleasure will I have the blessings of motherhood see after a lifetime of barrenness and infertility this has become her identity her core self is defined by what she is not rather than by what she is and a life of long disappointment has taught her this unbelieving hopelessness and despair which of course she doesn't share with anyone she just keeps all of these emotions hidden and buried in her head and in her heart she dares not laugh out loud she laughs on the inside to herself and she laughs not only because

God is unable she laughs because she is useless and she has this strong inner critic this inner voice of devastating self hatred I'm worthless not only disdaining God but deriding herself and too many of us know what that is like can any of you relate to the complexity of Sarah's story world I we had time to explore it together but how does the Lord respond how does the Lord look upon us and relate to us does he say Sarah great point you are you are spot on you absolutely are nothing you are worthless you are useless no he says in verse 13 the Lord said to Abraham why did Sarah laugh and say well I have old is anything too hard for the Lord. I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son. Now there's a mild rebuke in there because the Lord is astonished at her unbelief and he's astonished when we fail to believe in him.

But it's a gentle rebuke because he knows he's asking us to believe big things and wonderful things. And so he gives her this reassurance. He says, I'm going to come back to you because I'm the Lord. I'm the Lord who's chosen you. I'm the Lord who has a plan for you. I'm the Lord who's planned an entire timeline for your life. And so did Sarah respond and say, well, wow, what a relief.

[27 : 48] Now I see myself as you see me. Now I trust in your trustworthiness. No. Verse 15 says, Sarah was afraid so she lied and said, I did not laugh but he said, yes, you did laugh. And it's like one of the most awkward, uncomfortable scenes in the whole Bible. Like the nervous laughter when it was read is just telling. Somehow this mysterious stranger outside whom she cannot see is powerful enough to read her mind and verbalize her innermost secret thoughts. And this means that whether you like it or not, you're known. You're known. And does the Lord explode at her when she lies?

When she denies the truth and deceives? No, it's, the scriptures say that God's a wonderful counselor. And he comes in this gentle way. I imagine him kind of smiling and putting his arm around Sarah and saying, yeah, you did laugh. And he's not just speaking the truth and love to her as we must do. Not just trying to hold her accountable for her words. Not just wanting his people to be truth tellers. No, he's saying, I want you to acknowledge the wonderlessness of your laugh.

And somehow over the next 12 months, between Genesis 18 and Genesis 21, the Lord amazingly transforms Sarah's laugh from that laughter of incredulity and bitterness and cynicism and despair and hopelessness into a laughter of joy, a laughter of grace, a laughter of faith and wonder and hope.

And you can see it in chapter 21. In verse 1, it says, now the Lord was gracious. The Lord was gracious to Sarah. And he said, and the Lord, the Lord did for Sarah what he'd promised. And Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, the very time God had promised. And Abraham gave the name Yitzhak. He laughs to the son that Sarah bore him. He's a God of grace.

He graciously gives the son of laughter to show Sarah that he's sovereignly in control. And that his word is reliable. He does not make empty promises, but he makes gracious promises. And then he faithfully fulfills those promises precisely as he said he would. And Sarah's response to this is she breaks out into poetry to express her wonder and to express her joy at the grace of God, the grace of what God has done for her. She says in verse 6, God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. And she added, who would have said that to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age. She says, who would have said that Sarah would nurse children? She's looking beyond this singular child, Isaac, to children, to Isaac's children, and to their children's children, and to the great nation that God had promised, and to the kings of nations, the peoples that would come from her womb that would bless the whole world.

[31 : 38] And she's inviting everyone who hears this story to contemplate the power and the grace of God. God causes the laughter of incredulity to give way to the laughter of grace. And that God causes Sarah's hopeless despair to be transformed into joyous praise. Now friends, again, how do we apply this to our lives? Well, first of all, it's kind of a picture of when you become a Christian, right? When you become a Christian, you get a new identity. You get a new self-image in the way that Sarah does here. She gets this new joyful relationship with God. She says, God has brought me laughter. God has been so gracious to me.

But you also get this new joyful relationship with others. She says, when people hear the story of God's gracious intervention and God's salvation in my life, they're going to laugh with me. I'm going to be part of a community of laughter. And then she gets a new joyful relationship with herself. She who called herself worthless? She says, who would have thought that my story would have turned out this way? And that's how you feel when you become a Christian. You say, who would have thought that me, of all people, would be a Christian? Amazing love. How can it be that thou, my God, should die for me? Joyful, joyful, we adore thee.

God of glory. God of glory, Lord of love. It's a new identity. But secondly, the second application is that when you become a Christian, you get a new relationship with your failures. Right? Because the one time God comes to Sarah, she laughs in his face. And it's like her one moment. It's her one moment. And she, it's probably the greatest failure of her life. Right? And yet her son's name is what? Laughter. Right? From now on, every time Abraham and Sarah say Isaac's name, they're going to remember that they laughed at God in disbelief. But they're also going to remember that God always has the last laugh. That we do not live in a tragedy. We live in a comedy. The child's name is a memorial to remind Sarah and Abraham both of their faithlessness and of God's faithfulness. And you see, grace enables you to look upon your past failures. It enables you to look at your bitter laughter in the face of God's promises and to realize that he loves you. And that he accepts you in spite of all your failures. And then that the memory of all of your past faithlessness shows you just how good and how gracious God really is. And that only increases your gratitude to praise him more and more for his faithfulness. And then it in turn makes you into a person who's humble and compassionate toward the failures of others. That's God's grace.

So, I'm running out of time. Blame the Presbyterians on Friday. But I do want to talk not only about God's power and God's grace, but just close with a word on God's Son. And as we close, I want to caution you against a particular way of interpreting the Bible. Because we can read this and we can say, oh, okay, I got it. Sarah was old. She wanted something. She wanted a child. She believed. And she got what she wanted. Therefore, if we really believe, if we pray, if we trust God who says, is anything too hard or too wonderful for me, then we should expect all the impossible things to become possible. And we should stop settling for less. We should have greater visions, greater, bigger goals.

We should ask God for amazing things. We should trust God for physical health and material wealth and unbroken prosperity and happiness and success in a life that just goes up and to the right.

[36 : 01] Anybody ever heard Christians suggest this? Well, I want to point out two things. First of all, that this text does not teach us if we believe like Sarah, then God will do incredible things. Because the whole point of the story is that Sarah didn't believe. She's not seeking God. She's not on her knees. She laughs in God's face.

And when God comes down to bless her and do incredible things for her, he does it in spite of her unbelief. She does eventually believe, but my goodness. And the second thing I want to point out is that this text is wanting us to look at what happened to the son of promise. And of course, in this story, the son of promise is Isaac.

But who's the real son of promise? Who's the true and better Isaac? That son of promise that was born in a ridiculous and laughable situation? Who was born to that woman who wasn't just infertile. She had no husband.

In the Gospel of Luke says that the Lord came to her and through his angel, he said to her, the Lord is with you and you will conceive in your womb and you'll bear a son. And Mary said to the angel, she said, how can this be since I'm a virgin? And the angel answered her, nothing will be impossible with God. Nothing's too wonderful for God. And what happened to this promised child? Did he get physical health? Did he get material wealth? Did he get unbroken prosperity and happiness and success and a life that goes up and to the right? No, the greatest person who ever lived in the history of planet earth this man who had more faith than all of us combined, this man whose prayer life was a trillion times greater than any of our prayer lives, this man who trusted that nothing's too wonderful for God. What happened to him? He died on a cross, abandoned by his friends, mocked by his enemies, forsaken by his God. And why does God, in his wisdom, put the cross at the center of history and the center of reality? Why does he want us to keep our eyes fixed there? Because he wants us to see that the ultimate Isaac, the ultimate son of laughter, the one in whom we hear the laughter of God, the one who lived in a world of heavenly laughter, the one that says he was at the father's side, he was in the father's bosom from all eternity. They were infinitely laughing and rejoicing in each other. That he came into this world to become a man of sorrows, to become acquainted with grief, to be overcome with weeping at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, to be torn apart by the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, to be crushed under the agony of

Gethsemane and to cry out on his cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And the whole point is that Jesus lost the divine laughter so that you and I could get it.

[39 : 46] And he took our place of misery and condemnation to deal with sin and death so that we could live forever with him in laughter. Friends, God and Jesus Christ has trampled down all the impossibilities of our situation so that we can say like Sarah, who would have thought?

Who would have thought? Who would have said that we who were trapped forever in sin and death would be liberated to live with God everlastingly?

Who would have thought? Who would have said that in spite of all the ways that we have lived, we'd be adopted into the very family of God? See, friends, God has done the ridiculous.

God has done the laughable. He's welcomed us strangers. Indeed, he's welcomed us enemies to his feast at his table.

And so I want to encourage you with Paul's words in Romans 8, 32. He says, In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[41 : 10] Amen.